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AUTHOR Turman, Lynette; Blatt, Bobby
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ABSTRACT

Carthay Center Elementary School, an urban school in Los Angeles, developed Individualized Instruction through Open Structure in order to meet the needs of a changing student population. The program attempts to excite children about learning and to reinforce basic academic skills. The child's interest, needs, and abilities are integrated into the learning environment. The classrooms have cross-age grouping; there is flexibility of time and space, an informal room environment, and a variety of learning centers. In each classroom, the students plan their day with their teacher, fill out daily or weekly schedules, share ideas and feelings in a discussion circle, and make their own evaluation of their accomplishments and progress at the end of the day. Parents and community volunteers participate in all aspects of the school program. Students enrolled in the program for three years scored an average of 11 percentile points higher in reading and 16 percentile points higher in mathematics than students who transferred into the program. On teacher, parent, and student inventories, the work habits, social and emotional development, and intellectual development of the students received positive ratings. (DDO)

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INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION THROUGH OPEN STRUCTURE

"A CHILD CENTERED SCHOOL"

Individualized Instruction Through Open Structure is the program at Carthay Center Elementary School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. This program received ESEA Title III funding from 1971 - 1974 and is now funded as an ESEA Title III Incentive Grant for dissemination purposes.

The needs of Carthay Center Elementary School, when we started this program were not unique. Five years ago our teachers began to question their traditional approach to education. It seemed that the things that they had been doing over the years were no longer successful. The student population, reflecting the greater society, was changing. The students were more sophisticated, more critical, more cynical, and more probing. Inevitably they were restless and difficult to motivate. New educatioral methods were needed. So after much research, visiting, and conferring with our parents, we made a commitment to try this program.

We at Carthay Center Elementary School wanted a program that would both excite children about learning and reinforce basic academic skills. We developed the program Individualized Instruction Through Open Structure with the idea that learning could be joyful. We believed that each child was a unique individual, had worth and dignity, and a responsibility to others, and we felt each child should be inner directed, and when given the opportunity would explore and grow.

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Each teacher in the program has a real trust and belief in children and childhood, a respect for the intimacy of adult-child relationships, and an acceptance of children as they are, their backgrounds, their experiences, their natures, their talents, and their interests. Each teacher has the ability to help children become involved in the process of learning and make connections between experiences. The teacher keeps extensive records of every child's progress, and a diagnostic/prescriptive inventory of each individual. The teacher has the experience and motivation to help children to grow, to learn, and to find joy in coming to school. Each teacher knows that children's interests are varied, and that children are curious, imaginative, creative, feeling, and honest.

At Carthay Center School the child's interests, needs, and abilities are integrated with the learning environment. The classroom has multi-age grouping. There is flexibility of time and space, an informal room environment, and a variety of learning centers. The classroom is rich in manipulative materials, and choices for students. In each classroom the students plan their day with their teacher, fill out daily or weekly schedules, share ideas and feelings in a discussion circle, and make their own evaluation at the end of the day as to their accomplishments and progress on their schedules. Basic academic skills are emphasized in our program. Reading, math, and language arts are taught in a variety of ways. There are directed lessons to the whole class, small group lessons to 4 or 5 students, one to one instruction, and independent work at learning

centers which reinforces basic skills. Beyond the excitement and challenge of the classroom, our school has a Math Lab, a Postal System, a Resource Room, an Outdoor Education Center, a Science Lab, a Language Arts Learning Center, and a Kindergarten Gross-Motor Program. There are teams of volunteer and paid assistants to help in these labs, as well as in the classrooms. Learning is also extended into the community through walking trips within a one mile radius of the school. Six hundred and fifty students from Kindergarten through the sixth grade participate in this program of exploration, inquiry, examination, and discovery. The teacher no longer functions as a lecturer but more in the capacity of a facilitator, a guide, and a helper. The student's progress is discussed in parent-teacher-student conferences where all participate in the evaluating and planning.

Each parent is made to feel welcome to participate in and contribute to the educational program. Parents and community volunteers participate in all aspects of the school program. They assist in the classroom, tutor individual and small groups of children, staff the library, teach special interest classes, make and prepare materials, share their own knowledge and skills with the students, and work with the PTA and Advisory Council.

Apparently, love, work, and hope are a successful combination because at Carthay Center, an urban school with a high transiency rate and a rapidly increasing minority enrollment, students in the program for three years scored an average of 11 percentile points higher in reading and 16 percentile points higher in mathematics than those students who

transferred into the program. Sixth grade students who had been in the program for three years showed an average gain of 18 percentile points in reading and 19 percentile points in math. On teacher, parent and student inventories, students were rated as having positive attitudes in work habits, social/emotional development, and intellectual development.

Our exciting and successful experiment has made such a great impact on the community that parents move into the neighborhood so that their children can attend the Carthay Center Elementary School. The program has served as a catalyst for maintaining an ethnically balanced neighborhood. It has involved parents in the classroom and the total education of their children, and we feel that this is vital. Consistent additional help is essential in the classroom. No longer are we talking about one teacher in a self-contained classroom, but instead, we are talking about a team of people all working together to make education meaningful, valuable and enjoyable for children.

Individualized Instruction Th ough Open Structure enables students to increase their academic skills, make choices about the quality of their education, and enjoy school and the process of learning. We are committed to provide an environment where there is real freedom to learn. We must keep asking, probing, wondering, thinking how things can be better for children.

It is important to emphasize that in order to adopt or adapt our program, it is not necessary for the whole school to be involved. A small cluster

of two or three teachers may initiate the program, preferably on the same grade level or on adjoining grade levels. We would not recommend a single classroom do it alone because the teacher needs someone to bounce ideas off, share problems with, make materials with, and ultimately share joys with. The program is a fluid one, based on the child, teacher, and community needs. No two classrooms will have the same exact environment and/or program. When we made the commitment to open structure education, we provided intensive in-service training for both faculty and parents, not only in the philosophy, but in the practical step by step, day to day, procedures. It focused on opening up the classroom environment, preparing children for change, setting up centers, working with other adults in the classroom, record keeping and evaluation, and the optimum use of available resources. A professional library with the best current literature was established for the staff and the parents, and visits to similar programs were encouraged and were perhaps the most helpful way to gain first hand experience with open structure education. We also had workshops at the school where the teachers made and prepared materials together, sharing their thoughts, ideas and hopes.

Our program is operating in a closed egg-crate architectural style building of the 1920's. While the program needs a flexible, informal, open classroom environemnt, it can be adapted to any type of structure with a little imagination, creativity and a lot of love. And we did it.

Finally, we must state that even at our school, where the program has been in existance for four and one-half years, we are constantly modifying, re-evaluating and expanding this child centered program to meet our needs.

Lynette Turman

Bobby Blatt

ESEA Title III Incentive Grant Coordinators

Individualized Instruction Through Open Structure

Carthay Center School

6351 West Olympic Boulevard

Los Angeles, California 90048

(213) 935-2682